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Spying, reporting don't mix

CIA Director Stansfield Turner says it would be naive to think that other nations assume that foreign journalists have no associations with intelligence agencies. Well, if foreign governments had any doubts, Turner and President Carter have assured them that the CIA indeed will use journalists as spies if the situation calls for it.

Turner has disclosed that he personally approved the use of journalists for covert activities on three occasions. It is beside the point that the three operations never got off the ground. When members of the American Society of Newspaper Editors challenged him on the policy last week, his response showed that he had little regard for the serious consequences of the policy. "I don't understand why you think if you accept an assignment from me that you are no longer free," he said.

The CIA policy has several serious implications for the news media and the American public.

First, it is crucial that journalists operate independently of government. Journalists, of course, talk to CIA agents and they often trade information within bounds. But having journalists on the CIA payroll is something far different.

How can correspondents on the CIA payroll maintain that their reporting of U.S. activities is unbiased, particularly if the topic is the CIA itself? How is one to know, for that matter, that such correspondents will not file deliberately misleading reports to serve some secret CIA end?

By extension, the CIA policy casts doubt on all foreign correspondents. Since the CIA is quite properly squeamish about identifying CIA operatives publicly, no one can know which correspondents may have been coopted and which have not.

Second, by confirming the CIA's willingness to use journalists as

agents, Turner may encourage other countries to place more restrictions on reporters than they would otherwise. Intelligence agencies say that American journalists have been valued as operatives because they have contacts in foreign governments and because they can ask questions without arousing suspicion. It is unlikely, however, that foreign officials give reporters secret information, since journalists generally publish what they learn.

Further, if foreign governments believe the CIA uses reporters as spies, their contacts in government are likely to be weakened. Reporters may no longer be able to ask questions without arousing suspicion if other governments wonder whether they are not what they represent themselves to be.

Finally, to say that the CIA policy threatens the independence of the press is to say nothing of the fact that it may actually endanger the lives of American foreign correspondents. Reporters routinely remain behind in areas of conflict after other Americans have been evacuated. And, if some journalists are CIA agents, even those who are not might be in greater jeopardy than otherwise. It should not be forgotten that the militants who seized the American embassy in Tehran seek to justify their actions by claiming that their hostages are spies.

The press obviously has self-interested reasons for opposing policies that may fetter journalists in their efforts to gather the news. But the public has a stake in the issue as well. The independence of the press is protected by the First Amendment not to serve the special interests of the news media but to assure the free flow of information, which is essential for democracy to function. To that end, news from other lands, as well as that from home, must be reported fully and unvarnished.